

Watchtower overlooking grain fields near the Valley of Lebonah.
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Inset: Fragment of painted limestone relief depicting the work of plowing and sowing in the fields.
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THE SOILS OF ISRAEL



THE LORD PROMISED MOSES that Israel would discover “a land flowing with milk and honey” when they left Egypt (Ex. 3:8). This was good news for the herdsman and the gardener. After surviving the desert, the shepherds would find good pasture for grazing flocks in the Canaanite mountains. Fruit trees would be plentiful in a land known for its olives, figs, and dates, the raw materials for oil, sugar, and honey. But what about the farmer? Would this promised land provide the optimum environment for raising grain? Leaving Egypt behind, with its rich soil and natural irrigation, Israelite farmers expected to inherit “a land of milk and honey and bread.”

“For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you



Grain fields in Israel with thistles in the foreground.

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Above: Arab farmer plowing in rocky Judean wilderness soil.
Left: A wooden plow, from about 1400 B.C. This type plow share was shod with a bronze blade.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (5/29/18)

sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky” (Deut. 11:10-11).¹ Indeed, Canaan was not Egypt. Farming the “land of hills and valleys, watered by rain” was a risky business for the Israeli farmer. Without irrigation, farmers waited for the early rains in November to soften the parched ground, enabling them to sow the more productive winter crops of wheat and barley. The spring rainy season continued through April (Jer. 5:24), with the necessary rain to bring winter crops to maturation and fertilize summer crops planted in February. Standard amounts of deviation in rainfall varied from 20 to 60 percent due to meteorological and topographical conditions. Precipitation in the Judean highlands, accumulating up to 32 inches in a rainy year, surpassed rainfall in the valley of lower Galilee, which could only count on an average of 16 to 22 inches annually.² Due to the arid climate, three consecutive lean years of rain (above 30 percent deviation) insured crop failure (1 Kings 18:1).³

Farming the highlands was less risky than working the valleys. Highland farmers escaped the harmful effects of intense summer heat, which threatened crop maturation in the valley.⁴ During the dry season (May to October), crops at higher elevations were nourished by heavy dew.⁵ Furthermore, the Judean hills contain the desirable terra rossa, a very productive soil that derives from the decomposition of limestone bedrock. Shallow depths (less than 20 inches), however, made this soil susceptible to erosion, which highland farmers tried to overcome by terracing farm plots.⁶ Weathered chalk and marl produced the rendzina soils of the foothills. Greater depths of rendzina soils insured soil conservation, yet high lime content contributed to their overall poor organic quality. The least favorable basaltic soils are more common in upper and lower Galilee. Basaltic soils run deep through the plateaus of lower Galilee. Deriving from extinct volcanic activity, they contain minimal organic matter and large basalt boulders too huge to move.⁷

Jesus described typical farming practices of the Galilean in His parable of

the sower and the soils (Matt. 13:1-9). Seed was sown by hand, scattered over plowed ground. Liberal amounts of seed would fall on a variety of soil conditions. With a second ploughing, most of the seed would then be sown into “good soil” (v. 8), the deep basaltic soils that customarily supported grain crops. A good portion of the seed would fall on shallow ground covering the basalt rocks. Jesus’ reference to the threat of the scorching sun (v. 6) may indicate a summer crop since winter crops were harvested by mid-May. Inevitably, some seed would be folded into ground harboring weeds, the perennial pest of all farmers. Some seed would even be lost on the footpaths that divided farm plots. Exposed seed was prime bird feed (v. 4; see 6:26!). Although Jesus did not include in His parable the essential element in successful farming—rain—His description of the sower and the soils conformed to common knowledge. He certainly did not paint an ideal picture of agrarian life in lower Galilee.

Lesson Reference:

CUS: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Was the "hundredfold" harvest of the "good soil" typical of Israeli yields (Matt. 13:8)? It depends on whether Jesus was referring to the yield of grain per stalk, stalks per seed, or grain per seed. A hundredfold yield of grain per stalk was certainly above the average but not unusual to Israeli farmers. Most stalks would yield an average of 35 to 60 seeds, some producing even 100. Pliny recorded first-century yields of 400 seeds as the exception to the standard.⁸ Furthermore, one grain producing 100 stalks was considered an average yield for the area.⁹ The overall yield, however, of a hundredfold harvest of grain per total seed sown may be interpreted as extraordinary but still not unrealistic (Gen. 26:12).¹⁰ On the other hand, if Jesus was referring not to the overall yield of the farm plot but to the singular yield of the "good soil," then a hundredfold harvest would be exceptional.

How we interpret the yield of the "good soil" may affect the way we read the parable. Many who emphasize the superabundant harvest of the "good soil" see the parable as a word of encouragement to those who were anxious about the success of the gospel. "To human eyes much of the labour seems futile and fruitless, resulting apparently in repeated failure, but Jesus is full of joyful confidence."¹¹ Although many would oppose the work of the Sower, Jesus assured His disciples that the kingdom of God would come. In the end, God will produce a miraculous harvest (1 Cor. 3:6). Thus the main "character" of the parable is the seed, and the major point of the parable is that the "word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19) will prevail. To those who see the hundredfold harvest as a typical Israeli yield, the emphasis falls on the four types of soils. It is the soil that determines the outcome. The seed that falls on the footpath fails to germinate. Shallow ground cannot support crops. Weed infested soil retards growth. Since three soils fail to produce the desired result, the parable warns those who have ears to hear (v. 9) to receive the gospel seed as "good soil."

Conversely, the hard-hearted, the faint of heart, and the half-hearted "respond to his word with less than saving faith."¹² True faith is a generative faith. Thus "the one who hears the word and understands it . . . bears fruit" (v. 23).

Matthew's Gospel seems to support both interpretations. After Jesus told His first parable, the disciples questioned this new form of teaching (Matt. 13:10). According to Matthew, Jesus responded with a warning: those who reject His word fulfill "the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand . . . / For this people's heart has grown dull, / and their ears are hard of hearing'" (vv. 14-15). Thus, in Matthew's Gospel, those who do not comprehend the parable are characterized as those who do not understand the Word of God, and those who do not understand, according to Jesus, are unable to "turn for me to heal them" (v. 15, RSV). On the other hand, Jesus' warning can also be read as a word of encouragement for His disciples. Unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew recorded that Jesus made a clear distinction between His disciples and those who "shut their eyes" and were "hard of hearing" (v. 15, NRSVB). Before Jesus offered His own interpretation of the parable, He praised His disciples: "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (v. 16). Despite adversity, Jesus was confident that the seed of God's Word, sown into the hearts of those who had ears to hear, would yield an abundant harvest (v. 23).

The parables of the sower and the soils and the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) are the only two parables interpreted by Jesus. This provides a rare opportunity to gain insight as to how Jesus intended for His words to be understood. Perhaps Jesus interpreted His first parable to prepare the disciples for the story of His ministry so that they would not be surprised as the drama unfolded before their eyes.¹³ Each soil, then, represents successive stages in Jesus' ministry. Jesus attributed the failure of the first soil to the activity of the

evil one, who "comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart" since the listener "does not understand it" (Matt. 13:19). From the beginning the Pharisees resisted Sower's work the, calling Him a minister of Beelzebul (Matt. 12:24). Conversely, the "rocky ground" both "hears the word" and "receives it with joy" (Matt. 13:20). Yet a shallow commitment does not survive difficulty (v. 21). Similarly, Jesus was popular in Galilee until He began to encourage His disciples to "take up their cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). The thorny ground represents the one "who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing" (Matt. 13:22). A good man came to Jesus seeking eternal life. But when Jesus insisted that he sell what he had to give to the poor, "he went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (Matt. 19:22). Jesus' true disciples were not like this. They called Him Messiah of God, not prince of demons (Matt. 16:16). They followed Him to Jerusalem, willing to drink His cup suffering (Matt. 20:22). They left everything to follow Jesus (Matt. 19:27). As "good soil" they would yield a hundredfold harvest, making "disciples of all nations" (28:19). "Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matt. 13:9).

⁸From the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁹F. S. Frick, "Ecology, Agriculture and Patterns of Settlement," in *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 71-77.

¹⁰D. H. K. Amiran, "Land Use in Israel," in *Land Use in Semi-Arid Mediterranean Climates* (Paris: UNESCO, 1964), 104.

¹¹Amiran, 110-111.

¹²Charles F. Pfeiffer, *The Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 22, 24.

¹³Frick, 77-78.

¹⁴Frick, 78.

¹⁵Pliny, *Natural History*, 18.21.94-95.

¹⁶Pliny, 18.21.94-95.

¹⁷Varro, *On Agriculture*, 1.44.2.

¹⁸Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 150.

¹⁹Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 228.

²⁰John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels: History and Allegory* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 51.

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